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Terror's Reach

Written by Tom Bale

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TERROR'S REACH

TOM BALE

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One

They sent the first man in at midday. His job couldn't have been more straightforward. All he had to do was sit on the beach. Watch, listen, wait, and not be too obvious about it.

The target was Terror's Reach, a stunning accident of geography nestled within the dazzling surroundings of Chichester Harbour. One small island: five homes, nine residents and combined assets that ran into billions. It was a gold mine, practically begging to be plundered.

But the remote location posed its own challenges. The options for reconnaissance were limited, long-term surveillance all but impossible. There was no passing traffic, no way to go unnoticed. Here amongst the super-rich, anyone seen loitering was liable to be challenged or reported to the police.

The solution, on the day, involved a gamble, but the good weather helped to minimise the risk. It was an easy enough gig, and Gough was pleased to be assigned the role. He could sit on his arse as well as the next guy.

But it also carried serious responsibility. As first man in, his actions had a direct bearing on the whole operation. Get it wrong and he was in big trouble.

He was under no illusions about the kind of people he was working for. If he screwed up, they would probably kill him. Simple as that.

* * *

Two in the afternoon: siesta time. With the temperature pushing ninety any sensible person would be glad to lie in the shade and have a doze. But Jaden, at six years old, didn't see it in those terms. Bursting with restless energy, he had no intention of taking a nap, and he was making his feelings known to his mother.

Joe Clayton was aware of the protests coming from the other end of the garden, but he wasn't really listening to them. He was sitting on the broad stone terrace, finishing a lunch of cold meats and salad.

'I want to go to the beach.'

'Not now, Jaden. Sofia has to sleep, and so should you.'

'I'm not tired. Sofia's a baby. I'm six.'

'Well, go in the pool, then. But only for a few minutes.'

'I don't want to go in the pool. I want to go to the beach.'

'It's too hot. And I have to stay here and watch Sofia.'

'I can go on my own.'

'No, Jaden.'

'It's not fair. You don't let me do anything.'

There was a thud, followed by a loud crack. Joe looked up and saw something skidding across the grass. The boy had thrown one of his cars to the ground. It must have ricocheted, hit another toy and broken.

Jaden glowered at the tiny die-cast models, furious with his mother, and himself, and the whole world. It was a state Joe keenly remembered: the terrible aching frustration of childhood.

'I hate it here,' Jaden shouted. 'I wish we still lived with Nanny and Grandad.'

Joe winced. He had already decided to intervene when a first-floor window was thrown open and a voice above him roared: 'Cassie! Do something about that boy!'

The window slammed shut. On the lawn, Jaden scooped up the broken car and fled to his refuge: a sun-proof beach tent that was variously a cave, a fire station and an enemy camp. His mother called him back, but Jaden ignored her.

Maybe it was the heat making everyone so fractious, Joe thought.

Not that Valentin Nasenko ever had much patience with his stepson. It was little wonder the boy missed life with his grandparents.

Joe drained his glass of water, tipping the remnants of several ice cubes into his mouth. As he stood up his chair scraped on the stone and he almost expected another tirade from above. When Valentin was preoccupied with something, he demanded absolute peace and quiet. *And what Valentin Nasenko wanted . . .*

Joe had been working for the Nasenkos for just over nine months. He'd met them the previous September on the Greek island of Naxos. Having concluded a summer-long stint as a deckhand on a chartered yacht, he'd picked up some casual bar work in Naxos Town.

Valentin's principal adviser, Gary McWhirter, had been in the bar when a fight broke out between rival football fans during a televised Champions League game. Impressed by Joe's adroit handling of the mini-riot that ensued, McWhirter had invited Joe to meet Nasenko. One of his security team had resigned at short notice, and Valentin wanted an extra body to watch over his wife and newborn daughter during a three-week cruise around the Aegean.

At first Joe had been reluctant. The thought of babysitting a young mother and her child didn't hold much appeal, but inevitably the money on offer made the decision for him. One thousand euros a week, available in cash if he wanted it.

Cassie Nasenko had seemed equally unhappy with the arrangement. She rarely made eye contact with Joe, and was constantly ill at ease in his company. The situation didn't improve when Joe overheard her singing some cheesy ballad and quipped that, with a bit more practice, she could make a decent karaoke singer. He later discovered that at the age of seventeen Cassie had reached the final stages of a TV talent competition and had gone on to enjoy a brief career as a pop singer.

It wasn't until the third week that she grew accustomed to his presence, and he came to see that what he'd perceived as arrogance

was actually shyness. She was from an ordinary lower-middle-class background, very similar to his own, and she was still coming to terms with the idea of having staff at her beck and call.

When the cruise ended it was Cassie, rather than Valentin, who suggested that Joe should stay on the team. Joe suspected it was largely because of Jaden, Cassie's son from a short-lived relationship with an actor in a TV soap. Jaden was often quiet and withdrawn, but Joe seemed to have struck up a rapport with him in a way that few others had.

Returning to the UK posed another dilemma. In many ways he was in no hurry to go back, and yet he couldn't deny his fascination with the idea. It was there constantly in his dreams, when the past could be effortlessly unrolled and reworked.

Joe had often agonised over the *if* and *how* and *when* of his return, always careful not to dwell on the resultant question: *What then?*

The answer, as it turned out, was simple. Just go to work and get through the day. Go to work and never think about where you might be instead.

Joe descended the half-dozen steps from the terrace. The middle section of the garden was effectively a large playpen, a neat square of lawn fenced off for safety from the swimming pool and the jetty beyond. It was littered with trikes and footballs, and Jaden's current favourite diversion: a giant game of Connect 4 that was taller than he was.

Cassie Nasenko was sitting on a picnic blanket, staring pensively in the direction of Jaden's hideaway. Next to her, ten-month-old Sofia was stripped to her nappy and lay fast asleep beneath a large parasol, her pudgy white limbs contrasting with her mother's deep tan.

Cassie was a small, slight woman with an almost boyish figure: narrow hips, bony shoulders and thin arms. At first glance you could mistake her for a teenager, rather than a woman of twenty-five, a wife and mother of two children.

Throughout the present heatwave, unseasonable even for June, she'd

maintained a uniform of flip-flops, denim shorts and cotton shirts, with a bikini in place of underwear. Her sun-bleached brown hair was tied up in a ponytail, her green eyes clear and bright against the tan. A sprinkle of freckles over her nose gave her a pretty, tomboyish look.

At Joe's approach she put on a brave smile. Close up, he was struck by the weariness in her face. Sofia was teething at the moment, and having a bad time of it. Despite the sleepless nights, and contrary to her husband's wishes, Cassie remained determined to bring up her children without the help of a nanny. Joe admired her for that.

He said, 'I'll take him to the beach if you want.'

'We shouldn't give in to him when he's had a strop.'

'I know. But for a quiet life.' Joe nodded towards the house. 'Just this once.'

'All right. Only for ten minutes or so. Then he really must get out of the sun.'

'You okay if I have a swim while I'm there?'

'Fine,' said Cassie. 'But keep an eye on him. He's being a little monster at the moment.'

'Jaden's a good kid at heart. I'm sure he didn't mean what he said about living here.'

As soon as the words were out he knew he'd overstepped the mark, but she just gave him a curious, slightly sad smile.

'Oh, I think he meant every word.'

Two

Terror's Reach had captivated Joe from the moment he'd first set eyes on it. He wasn't familiar with the area, and had imagined Chichester Harbour to be a man-made construction, with a sea wall and all the accoutrements of a commercial port: quays and cranes and slipways, and maybe a yacht marina.

In fact, it was a vast natural harbour, straddling the counties of Hampshire and West Sussex. Eleven square miles of water in a tidal basin of mudflats and salt marsh. There were three main channels and countless other inlets, creeks and waterways around half a dozen peninsulas of varying size and shape.

The Reach was a small island on the eastern side of the harbour, once joined to the mainland by a narrow causeway, accessible on foot at low tide. Its name derived from a Victorian working boat, the *Terror*, which had sailed around Chichester Harbour, transporting oyster catches from larger offshore vessels. The Reach marked the furthest southerly point on its route.

Although uninhabited until the 1890s, the island's sheltered coves and woods had been used by smugglers for centuries. When coastal erosion finally destroyed the causeway in the mid-1930s, a chain ferry was installed, jointly funded by the residents and by the War Office, which had acquired two-thirds of the five-hundred-acre island for use as a training camp.

The ferry was superseded in the 1960s by the construction of a road bridge, and while the Ministry of Defence still maintained the training camp, its lack of use in recent years had led to fevered speculation about its future. In the meantime, the only private dwellings were spread in a graceful arc on the south-western corner, with views out to sea and across the bay towards Hayling Island.

Originally there had been eleven relatively modest houses on the island, but in the past two decades all but one had been demolished and replaced by much larger, architect-designed mansions. Now there were just five in total, with an average value of four million apiece, making property on the Reach almost as expensive as that in the more famous resort of Sandbanks, about seventy miles to the west.

Joe had spent every spare moment exploring his new home, and it had brought him up short when he first caught himself thinking of it in that way. This felt like home – or at least the nearest thing to a home that he could hope for.

Jaden's whole demeanour was transformed once he stepped through the gate at the bottom of the garden. It was as though he'd been granted an unexpected release from prison. His shoulders lifted and he grinned, whooping with pleasure as he broke away from Joe's grasp and tore off along the timber decking. Joe had to jog to keep up.

The decking was about five feet wide, forming a communal walkway that ran for some three hundred yards along the rear of the properties. Each home had a private jetty that branched out from the deck and extended fifty or sixty feet over the water, though today there were only a couple of small craft moored here. For most of its length there was no fence or safety rail on the seaward side of the deck, so Joe had to watch that Jaden didn't trip and fall in.

Nevertheless, he couldn't help admiring the boy's daredevil streak, perhaps because he recalled a similar quality in himself at that age. It meant Jaden was straining for independence at every opportunity

and, to his mother's continual despair, angrily protesting whenever limits were imposed on him.

Joe could see both points of view. To a restless, energetic six-year-old the island must have seemed like a personal adventure playground. And in many ways the Reach was the safest place imaginable in which to grow up. Only a handful of residents. Minimal traffic. No strangers passing through.

But Cassie, like many parents where their first born was involved, saw danger lurking around every corner. That was all the more reasonable, given her husband's wealth: it was why Joe had been employed, after all. For weeks Jaden had been pleading to be allowed to go to the beach on his own, and Cassie had steadfastly refused.

Valentin's property was furthest from the beach, so their route took them past the other four homes. Three of the four were imposing buildings in vastly different styles: mock-Georgian, ultra-modern and faux Gothic. The gardens were a little more uniform in design: all terraced, with a mix of lawns and paved areas. Most had swimming pools. All were scandalously under-appreciated, in Joe's opinion.

It was Friday afternoon, a truly glorious summer's day, and yet there was no one outside to enjoy it. Joe and Jaden didn't see a single resident until they reached the last house, owned by a retired couple: Donald and Angela Weaver. Theirs was the only remaining original property, and even though it had a substantial ground-floor extension it was modest in comparison with its neighbours.

Donald Weaver was just visible amidst the mass of sweet peppers and tomato plants in his greenhouse, a small red watering can bobbing about in mid-air as if of its own accord. Jaden spotted him first, broke his stride to call and wave, but there was no response. Either Donald hadn't noticed him, or he just couldn't be bothered to acknowledge the boy. Joe had a feeling it was the latter.

A few yards beyond the Weavers' home the deck ended at a tall gate, marked with a warning on the opposite side: RESIDENTS ONLY. In case anyone should disregard the sign, one of the residents, Robert

Felton, had paid to install a basic combination lock, as well as adding several yards of fencing to prevent intruders from simply climbing around the gate. It hadn't been a universally popular addition, but as owner of two of the island's five properties Felton's wishes often tended to prevail.

Jaden had already fumbled the gate open by the time Joe caught up with him. They stepped down onto a gravel path, fringed by wild grasses bleached almost white by the sun. Less than ten yards away was the narrow shingle beach that ran along the island's southern shore, facing the open sea.

It was a beautiful, solitary location, neglected by the residents and little known to the outside world. Visitors weren't prohibited on the Reach, but nor were they encouraged. There were no parking areas, and the asphalt road gave way to a narrow track of beaten earth for the last thirty yards between the Weavers' home and the beach. By way of further deterrents, nettles and brambles had been allowed to encroach on the track, and a sign marked PRIVATE PROPERTY had been erected – illegally – by Robert Felton.

Today, however, those deterrents had failed.

There was a stranger on the island.

Gough heard them coming before he saw them, but only by a second or two. He didn't have time to react, and he was professional enough to know that sudden movements attracted suspicion. So did furtive ones, in a situation like this. Better not to move at all.

He ignored them for a moment, then realised it would be unnatural to show no curiosity. He turned and gave them a glance. A man and a boy, dressed for the beach. The man had a couple of towels rolled up under his arm.

They were from the Nasenko house, he decided. The kid must be the wife's bastard offspring. And the man was a bodyguard. Had to be.

Gough made eye contact with him, noted the man's surprise, and maybe something else. Something harsher. To counteract it he gave

the sort of quick nod that said: *Hello* but also: *Yeah, I'm here, too. Get over it.*

Then he went back to ignoring them, hoping that they would ignore him in return. He gripped his fishing rod and stared at the sea and worked very hard not to look at the rucksack by his side. But he was acutely aware of what it contained.

If they left him alone, all well and good.

If they didn't, there was always the gun.